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ABSTRACT

Workplace literacy was the focus of attention during the era of the National Workplace Literacy Program (NWLP), funded by the U.S. Department of Education from 1988-1996. Since then, it has not disappeared, in part because recent legislation such as the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) and Welfare Reform Act has increased the work-related focus of adult basic and literacy education. At the national level, projects such as the National Institute for Literacy's Equipped for the Future are signs of continued federal attention to workplace literacy. Much of the leadership now resides at the state level. At the local level are WIA and union-funded programs. What is missing, however, is leadership and support from policy makers and funders. During the NWLP era, two instrumental assumptions were as follows: (1) a direct relationship exists between inadequate basic skills and economic problems and (2) the functional context approach is the most effective way of improving basic skills. However, assumptions about the relationship between individual skills and the economy tend to overlook such factors as globalization, how organizations structure work, and social and economic policies. Alternatives to functional context such as participatory and sociocultural approaches are being advocated. Since NWLP ended, there is still a great deal of workplace literacy activity, and adult educators are still dealing with many of the same issues. (Contains 14 references.) (SK)

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Whatever Happened to Workplace Literacy?

by Susan Imel
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The National Workplace Literacy Program (NWLP), funded through the National Literacy Act of 1991, created a national forum for the topic of workplace literacy. From 1988 through 1996, nearly $133 million was appropriated to fund over 300 NWLP demonstration projects ("Archived Information: Adult Education–National Workplace Literacy Program" n.d.; ***Exemplary Products Produced by National Workplace Literacy Program Demonstrations Projects 1995-1998*** 1998). A number of positive spinoffs resulted from the NWLP, including meetings of NWLP project directors, presentations on NWLP projects and other workplace literacy topics at national conferences, professional development materials and activities for workplace literacy instructors, and a large increase in the number of documents on workplace literacy in the ERIC database (Imel 1995). In short, workplace literacy was the focus of attention during the NWLP era, and a great deal of workplace literacy activity occurred in the field. But what has happened to workplace literacy since funding ceased? Has it disappeared? Have the issues surrounding it changed? This ***Myths and Realities*** examines these questions as they apply to workplace literacy following the NWLP.

Has Workplace Literacy Disappeared?

Although workplace literacy in the United States since 1998 has been described as a "mixed bag" (Jurmo 2003, p. 22), it has not disappeared. Due to the Workforce Investment Act of 1998 (WIA) and the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWOPA), the overall thrust of adult basic and literacy education has become more work related (Belzer and St. Clair 2003). The passage of the WIA created a direct link between literacy education and employment goals, whereas PRWOPA, more commonly known as the Welfare Reform Act, created opportunities for states to develop basic skills programs that focused on employment goals (ibid.; Imel 1998). Despite the demise of the funding for a specific program dedicated to workplace literacy such as the NWLP, a number of efforts have continued at the national, state, and local levels, several of which are reviewed in this section.

National-level Efforts

The National Institute for Literacy's (NIFL) Equipped for the Future (EFF) project, a standards-based reform effort to improve the adult literacy, basic skills, and lifelong learning systems in the United States, is designed around the adult roles of family, community, and work. As a part of the EFF effort, a role map for workers was developed that "defines what adults need to know and be able to do to be successful workers in the 21st century" ("Who Will Be First Hired and Last Fired?" 2003, p. 2). The role map includes broad areas of responsibilities, key activities, and indicators that can be used in curriculum development and ongoing assessment (http://www.nifl.gov/lincs/collections/eff/masters/worker.pdf; Jurmo 2003).

The Division of Adult Education and Literacy (DAEL), Office of Vocational and Adult Education, U.S. Department of Education maintains a section on workplace education on its website (http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ovae/pi/AdultEd/workplace.html). This site provides information about research and evaluation, activities of note, and links to other sites. In addition, DAEL provides funding for some activities such as an annual Workplace Learning Conference, and WorkplaceBasicSkills.com (http://www.workplacebasicskills.com/), a site that contains information, tools, and advice on workplace basic skills for employers.

The Workforce Education Special Collection (http://worklink.coe.utk.edu/) is another national effort that supports workplace literacy by providing information and a forum for discussion. Supported by both NIFL and DAEL, this web-based effort contains information for various stakeholders in workplace literacy, including employers, labor unions, learners, and instructors.

State-level Efforts

Much of the leadership for workplace literacy now resides at the state level. Pennsylvania and Virginia, for example, are two states that have developed work force improvement networks designed to improve the development and delivery of workplace basic skills throughout their respective states (http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ovae/pi/AdultEd/workplace.html). Massachusetts' Building Essential Skills through Training (BEST) project is an example of a state project that supports the development of basic skills through system building. BEST responds to the need to develop a more highly skilled work force in Massachusetts by promoting career ladders within employment sectors through the use of a model of integrated work force development. In its first 10 months of operation, BEST served over 900 incumbent workers who received education and training services identified by 43 industry partners (Lea, Lesser, and Uvin 2003).

The following states are also using the EFF framework to link adult education and work force development: Hawaii, Maine, New Jersey, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Texas, Vermont, and Washington ("Who Will Be First Hired and Last Fired?" 2003). In New Jersey, for example, Workforce Investment Boards are being trained to integrate EFF into their strategic planning, and work force development staff in the adult literacy labs at one-stop centers are receiving EFF training ("New Jersey Uses EFF to Structure Its Workforce Development System" 2003).

Local Efforts

Most workplace literacy programs are operated without federal assistance, but at the local level, the WIA is providing funds for workplace literacy in the form of preemployment programs (Belzer and St. Clair 2003). In Ohio, for example, over 25% of the local programs offer workplace literacy as one component of their services, ranging from traditional adult basic and literacy education for incumbent workers on or off the work site to more customized services designed in collaboration with the employee (Jeff Gove, Ohio Department of Education, personal communication, November 18, 2003).

Unions develop and implement workplace literacy programs at the local level. Jurmo (2003) describes two such efforts. The first involved the New York Transportation Workers Union (TWU) that was developed in conjunction with the Consortium for Worker Education (CWE). Using the EFF list of necessary skills, the TWU developed classes to help its members acquire computer, electronics, math, and other skills. Following the attacks on 9/11, the Garment Workers Union also worked with CWE to set up a program for its members who were threatened with unemployment.

Summary

A number of activities are occurring in what was formerly known as workplace literacy. What is missing, however, is leadership and support from policy makers and funders for the work (ibid.). In addition, the emphasis of the WIA on employment has redirected the focus in workplace literacy from the federal to the local level and, thus, "those who create and benefit from effective work-related basic education pro-

grams are generally not organized as an effective constituency to educate and pressure policy makers for the support they need" (ibid., p. 22).

Have the Assumptions Guiding Workplace Literacy Programs Changed?

A number of assumptions guided workplace literacy programs during the NWLP era. Two related assumptions that were particularly instrumental in driving the development of programs were the notion that a direct relationship exists between inadequate basic skills and the nation's economic plight and that the functional context approach is the most efficient and effective way of improving workers' basic skills (Imel and Kerka 1992). Despite evidence that these assumptions may not be accurate, they continue to operate today.

The relationship between workplace literacy and the economy gives rise to a number of myths. Workers with inadequate or limited basic skills, for example, are still frequently cited as a reason for the nation's economic woes (Castleton 2002; Hull 1999). Many employers cultivate a skills deficit ideology by blaming workers for not having the skills needed for the contemporary workplace (Castleton 2002; Nash 2001). The individual worker's lack of skills, not changes in the workplace, are believed to be the cause of poor economic performance (Castleton 2002), and skills are seen as human capital requirements that enable the United States to be competitive in the global economy (Belzer and St. Clair 2003). These arguments and assumptions about the relationship between individual skills and the economy tend to overlook such factors as globalization, how organizations structure work, and social and economic policies that have a bearing on national productivity (Castleton 2002).

The assumption that workers are not up to the demands of the workplace has resulted in the use of the functional context instructional approach with its focus on skill or competence as an individual characteristic (ibid.). The approach that teaches the skills employers feel are needed in the work setting is the educational model that prevails in the literature on workplace literacy (ibid.; Nash 2001). In the functional context approach, literacy is viewed as mechanistic and technicist with lack of literacy representing many of the most serious problems in contemporary society; thus workers with limited basic skills become scapegoats for the nation's economic ills (Castleton 2002). Because work is increasingly complex, however,"far richer, meaningful formulations of literacy than those offered in the functional literacy discourse need to be applied to the context of work to fully appreciate the role literacy plays for workers and for work" (Castleton 2000, p. 101).

Although the functional context approach is still widely used in workplace literacy programs, other educational approaches are being advocated. Nash (2001), for example, recommends a participatory approach that encourages critical inquiry enabling learners to take more control of their world by analyzing social forces limiting their options. According to Nash, "the participatory approach differs from a functional context approach in that it doesn't presuppose a particular solution (skills) to a predefined problem (workers)" (p. 189). In her study of a workplace, Hull (1999) found that the functional context approach was limited and recommended the use of a sociocognitive theory of learning that focuses on the connection between learning and doing. It includes not only the texts that workers use but also the social networks and relationships. Hull extends the framework by situating literacy not only in the immediate work environment but also within the larger cultural, social, and historical environment. In a similar vein, Castleton (2000, 2002) recommends a sociocultural approach to understanding literacy needs of the workplace that helps workers reflect on their explicit and tacit knowledge and the contexts in which they have obtained it. These alternate approaches all acknowledge the complexity of work, the importance of social relationships and networks, and the effect of the wider social, political, and economic environment on literacy requirements.

Conclusion

The old adage "the more things change, the more they remain the same" comes to mind when reviewing what has happened to workplace literacy since the NWLP ended. Certainly, workplace literacy has not disappeared. Although a large amount of activity is evident, the focus that was provided by the NWLP is lacking. Many of the issues that surrounded workplace literacy during the NWLP are still present, particularly those associated with individual workers and curriculum models. These issues reflect those present in the general field of adult literacy where discussions about instructional models frequently reflect diverse philosophical orientations.

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